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Egypt Turning New Page

Heikal's Era Over

By Jim Hoagland

Washington Post Foreign Service

BEIRUT, Feb. 3—The abrupt removal of Egypt's best-known political commentator Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, from his post as director of Cairo's Al Ahram publishing house this weekend is an epitaph for an era in the Arab world.

As editor of the daily Al Ahram, Heikal possessed influence well beyond that of a well-connected journalist. Under his close friend, the late President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Heikal helped make Egyptian policy. His weekly columns often provided the world with the only clues as to what was going on in Nasser's closed system.

Friday's column, a thinly veiled attack on the warm relationship that Nasser's successor, President Anwar Sadat, is developing with the Nixon administration, was apparently Heikal's last.

Less than 24 hours after it appeared, a presidential decree was issued stripping Heikal of his post at Al Ahram and naming him as a press adviser to Sadat. The move could only be a calculated insult to a man of Heikal's considerable ego.

Friday's column may have been a last straw. But it alone was not the cause of Heikal's apparent downfall. He has long been at odds with Sadat who, as he has gradually strengthened his hold on Egypt, has effectively shunted off to oblivion most of the chief figures of the Nasser era.

The removal will reverberate throughout the Arab world, where Heikal was the most widely read political writer of his day. Libya's leader, Col. Muammar Qaddafi, who is close to Heikal, and the dwindling number of hard-core Nasserists elsewhere will see it as a further betrayal by Sadat of the Nasserist cause.

But the ouster will be welcomed—if indeed it has not been prompted—by Saudi Arabia's King Faisal, Sadat's new ally and Heikal's long-time foe.

The first signal of a still incomplete major change in the government-controlled media came last week when Sadat pardoned journalist Mustafa Amin, jailed in 1965 as a Central Intelligence Agency spy by Nasser, and permitted his brother Ali to return from exile.

The Amin brothers, who had long been in the Cairo press, told friends they had been promised important

press jobs. Yesterday, Sadat named the grateful Ali Amin Heikal's replacement at Al Ahram.

Al Ahram is the intellectual flagship of the active, if officially muzzled Cairo press. The 49-year-old Heikal, who became editor of the paper in 1959, shrewdly built around it a publishing empire that is the envy of the third world.

Al Ahram publishes books and magazines and is the largest distributor of printed material in Egypt. Nominally owned by Egypt's only political party, the Arab Socialist Union, the company imports some commercial goods for retail sales, and Heikal housed it in an ultra-modern printing plant and office building.

Moreover, Heikal collected the Arab world's most widely respected and politically diverse stable of journalists, thinkers and writers for the publications under his command. He maintained a group of study institutes that collectively form the Arab world's most important think tanks.

Cynics maintain that Heikal has manipulated this political diversity to float with the rapidly changing currents of Egyptian politics, bringing leftwing writers to the fore when rightist politics were unpopular and then pushing them back into the shadows when the wheel turned.

But he also established a reputation of fighting for his associates and protecting them from the frequent purges of intellectuals conducted by Nasser and then Sadat.

Heikal called his weekly column "Frankly Speaking"—something he rarely did in print. A typical Heikal column contained enough obscure phrases to permit him to argue later, as he frequently did, that he had been misinterpreted. This trend has been especially apparent since Nasser's death and the disappearance of the automatic access he had enjoyed to Egypt's ruling circle.

But Heikal also had a penchant for going against the grain of government development and a sure instinct for not getting caught by the frequent reversals of the wheel.

This led him to distribute his spleen evenly between the Soviet Union and the United States. Several months before Sadat's sudden expulsion of Russian military advisers, Heikal was sniping weekly at the Kremlin, which replied by publicly demanding his head in the Moscow press.

Now, with Sadat giving effusive praise to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and President Nixon, Heikal has privately been saying that Sadat is foolish to place so much trust in a weakened and still untrustworthy U.S. administration. His columns since November have skirted close to repeating this sentiment publicly.

Such criticism surprised those who view Heikal as essentially pro-Western. This impression is reinforced by his taste for luxury and the capitalist skill with which he has sold his writings outside Egypt. Heikal, who stands five feet six inches tall, sports expensively tailored suits and the longest and most expensive imported cigars in Cairo.

Close associates say that Heikal's recent criticisms of the United States stem from an intense feeling of Egyptian nationalism. "He is simply afraid that a deal has been made between Moscow and Washington to deliver Egypt into a new American hegemony to further détente. He wants that no more than he wants Russian domination," one of his friends says.

The growing rift with Sadat has been evident for some time. In August, Gen. Mohamed Naguib, overthrown by Nasser in 1954, charged in an interview with a Beirut magazine that Heikal had once been on the payroll of a suspected American agent. Naguib, freed from house arrest by Sadat, would not have given such an interview without Sadat's approval, diplomats assumed at the time.

In January, Heikal felt that Sadat deliberately snubbed him at the Aswan dam project, putting him on the same level as the editors of Cairo's two other large newspa-

Stories circulated in Cairo that Sadat had tried to let Heikal down easily by asking him to become minister of information.

Heikal reportedly refused the job, which he held for five months before Nasser's death. The job that Sadat ordered him to take Friday night is even less prestigious, having been held in the recent past by able but essentially unimportant civil servants.

News agencies reported from Cairo today that Heikal has also turned down the press adviser job, but gave no clues to his future plans.

Although in eclipse, Heikal should probably not be counted out prematurely. He maintains extensive political contacts in the Arab world and in the West, and he can trade on the Nasserist aura to gain support.

Cairo newsmen expect further changes in the Egyptian media; to accompany a general cabinet change that has been predicted for weeks but which now seems to have been delayed until next month.

To replace Heikal as chairman of the board at the Al Ahram publishing house, Sadat named his Deputy Premier and Information Minister Abdel Kader Hatem. The early betting was that Hatem, once Nasser's chief domestic propagandist, would be the chief victim of the coming cabinet change.

But government sources report that Hatem, a skilled bureaucratic infighter and, not coincidentally, a bitter enemy of Heikal, has mounted a strong counter attack and is pressing Sadat to let him remain in a powerful position.